

'Diploma mills' have it too easy

A lack of regulations makes Alabama a prime location

By GREGORY G. FITCH

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Over the past several decades, the delivery of education has expanded from the traditional classroom. Instruction methods now include online and video teaching, interactive videos, compressed video and correspondence delivery.

The change has been more accommodating for many students, typically those employed full-time who are seeking a degree but have limited time to commit.

A market-driven need for skilled workers has made education in the 21st century a big business. As a business commodity, education is a key to economic development and quality of life.

That means education is in demand — and, unfortunately, there are those who have seen this as a way to make money by offering questionable and even fake college degrees.

These operations, often Internet-based and complete with fraudulent accreditation, have grown into a lucrative, billion-dollar-per-year industry that utilizes sophisticated marketing techniques and delivers false credentials with big price tags.

Alabamians are particularly vulnerable to such fly-by-night operations. To understand why, you need read no further than the open-

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'Diploma mills' have it too easy in Alabama

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ing line of a March 15 story in the Jackson Hole, Wyo., Star-Tribune: "Preston University has moved to Alabama — where there's less oversight of postsecondary education now that Wyoming requires private universities to be accredited."

As states elsewhere tighten their restrictions, more and more unaccredited schools are heading to places like Alabama, where regulations are lax.

We define these "diploma mills" as institutions of higher education operating without supervision of a state or professional agency, and thus granting diplomas that are fraudulent or worthless.

Some require little or no academic work; others may require an essay. Either option comes with a consumer price tag and academic credits that won't transfer to an accredited college or meet employer requirements.

We at the Alabama Commission on Higher Education are not against reputable institutions. It's the fly-by-night companies that we're trying to protect the public against.

In order to do that, we need better coordination at the state level to close the loopholes that enable businesses promising quick-and-easy degrees to set up shop in our state.

Currently, the Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education have the major roles to play in dealing with this issue involving instate operations and non-resident institutions.

Responsibilities are being reviewed and structural changes considered that will strengthen the review and licensure processes.

This collaborative initiative mirrors efforts by other states nationally to close their borders to such operations.

Among the options under discussion are provisions that would provide state oversight of degree-granting authorization, and consolidation of the licensure and review processes.

Alabama's low unemployment rate has many employees seeking an advanced degree in order to be considered for a promotion within a company.

The guidelines and less-structured curriculums offered by these schools appear as tailor-made programs for each student.

However, the end result is less than lucrative. A piece of parchment without a real education behind it is worthless in the marketplace.

Many strides are being made to improve Alabama's educational system. We do not need to be nationally recognized as a haven for diploma mills.

In this age of slick marketing campaigns with bold promises, consumers need to be market savvy, even when it comes to making educational choices.

Alabama is joining other states throughout the country in bringing this issue to light.

ACHE has a link on its Web site explaining diploma mills and ways to recognize them (go to www.ache.state.al.us and click on "Colleges and Universities").

We urge people to exercise their rights as consumers to get answers before making a commitment on what could turn out to be a bad investment of time and money.